The Practical Use of the Saber
For Cavalry Reenactors and Living Historians.

By
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The use of the saber from horseback requires special skills not commonly practiced by many of today's living historians. Unlike the use of the pistol or carbine in reenacting, which involves no direct contact with an opponent, the saber requires the simulation of combat by physical contact. The striking of blades, either individually or in a staged melee, poses challenges, as well as some danger, to both the horse and the rider. Often times, the potential risks are overlooked and riders engage in saber play with neither adequate training nor proper preparation.

Some of the better organized reenactor groups practice the regulation saber "Manual of Arms" and present demonstrations of saber skills such as "running the heads". Although these exercises may be entertaining to spectators and fun to perform, they do little to school the trooper and the horse in the skills required to properly use the saber from horseback. In fact "running the heads" and other such exercises were intended to be a demonstration of the rider's acquired skills with the saber and not a means of instructing its use. It is only necessary to view a video or film of a reenacted demonstration or melee to get a clear picture of how poorly prepared and unskilled many of the participants actually are.

The most common faults among reenactors in the use of the saber from horse back are the failure to properly manage the movements of the horse and the improper use of the aids in cooperation with the saber hand. There seems to be some historical basis for these faults. Period literature tended to focus on the saber only in its Manual of Arms and provided scant instruction in the horsemanship necessary for its use. Tactics manuals of the Civil War period and long after, cautioned the trooper not to "derange" the position of the body, but offered no further explanation for this rather important instruction. It was not until 1914 that any mention was made in the regulations and training manuals regarding the use of the rein hand, and this was offered only as a caution not to, "jerk the horse's mouth while making any movements with the saber." Horsemanship in the use of the saber was left almost entirely to the judgment of the instructor.

The use of the saber in American history is purely a military pursuit. It was rarely a civilian weapon as it was in some other parts of

not part of modern equestrian training, there are few instructors today who are either familiar with the saber or qualified to teach this skill.

In all athletic activities performed from horseback, the quality of the rider's seat is the one essential and common element. Without a secure and well-disciplined seat the rider is unable to make consistent or effective use of all the aids. The inability to communicate efficiently with the horse while performing multiple tasks, unrelated to the management of the horse, is above all else the most common cause of poor rider performance. This is all the more apparent when the management of the horse needs to be subordinated to the activity being performed, such as playing polo, field hunting, cattle roping, mounted law enforcement or reenacting the use of the saber in mounted combat. None of these activities can be performed well unless the rider is properly seated and the horse is responsive to the application of the aids.

Beginning at the time of the Civil War and until the mid 1930s, when use of the saber was discontinued, the United States Cavalry taught the trooper its use in combat while seated in a McClellan saddle. There is considerable military literature and training material of this period that describes in detail the evolution of the military riding seat and the use of the aids. The United States Cavalry's version of the military seat changed little from 1834 until the 1930s when it became a “forward” or “balanced” seat. In its final form the “American Military Seat” is still considered the best and most appropriate seat for a rider in the McClellan saddle. The United States Cavalry published the first official version of “Horsemanship and Horsemastership” in 1935 and the last in 1944, but the riding seat did not change during this period. The basic elements of the pre-1935 military seat are described here, since most reenactors portray this earlier period, but it would be useful for all reenactors who sit a McClellan saddle to spend some time acquiring the basics of the 1935 “American Military Seat” and the proper use of the aids. In any event a good riding seat is necessary for use of the saber, as well as being a cornerstone of accomplished military horsemanship.

United States military equitation philosophy in the late 19th century underwent some fundamental changes in approach, but the basic elements of the seat changed very little. The military seat that evolved in the early 20th century, often referred to as the “forward” or “balanced seat”, is still common today among field horsemen. This later riding seat, was intended to place the rider in the saddle in such a manner that the horse had freedom of movement in all of its parts and could perform for extended periods of time over long distances. Although fatigue and soreness were inevitable to both the horse and rider in

center of balance to the movement and gait of the horse. This military riding seat was considered than, as it is now, the most secure general-purpose seat for the rider, and the least punishing for the horse. It would be well for all reenactors and living historians to practice this seat.

Historical accuracy for the periods most often portrayed, 1861 through 1892, dictates that the earlier or "close" riding seat be described here. This seat was not dynamic to the movement of the horse and placed the rider in a fixed or "static" position in the saddle. To achieve this "close" seat the position of the rider in the saddle was described in the following manner.

(1) The buttocks should be pushed well forward underneath the body and bear equally upon the middle of the saddle. The buttocks should not press against the cantle.

(2) The thighs should extend downward and slightly forward. They should rest without constraint upon their flat sides and clasp the horse evenly.

(3) The knees should be bent but without stiffness, and should clasp the horse snugly.

(4) The lower legs should extend downward and slightly backward; they should be in contact with the horse but without contraction. When the lower leg is in proper position, the stirrup strap should hang vertically.

(5) The ball of the foot should rest easily on the tread of the stirrup, the heel slightly lower than the toe, the ankle without stiffness.

(6) If the rider is without stirrups, the feet should hang naturally, toes hanging down; they should be free from stiffness in the ankles.

(7) The upper part of the body should be easy, free, and erect. The spinal column should be supple, especially in the small of the back.

(8) The shoulders should be thrown back evenly but without hollowing or stiffening the back.

(9) The arms should be free, the elbows falling naturally by the side.

(10) The reins should be held in one or both hands as hereafter prescribed.

(11) The head should be erect but without stiffness in the neck.

(12) The eyes should not be downcast but alert and glancing well to the front.

A good riding seat is nearly impossible to achieve without developing a degree of suppleness in the rider's body. It is the suppleness

incidence of soreness and breakdown of the cavalry horse. It was a generally accepted principle that the more supple the rider, the sounder the mount.

Before attempting to work with the saber the reenactor should think in terms of these three “S's". Saddle, Supple, Seat. First, a well fit *saddle*. Second, a *supple* body. Third a secure military *seat*. When these have been accomplished in that order, the rider is ready to begin working with his hands and the aids in preparation for the saber.

Without the balance and confidence of a well-developed seat it is unlikely that a rider will ever acquire the softness that is characteristic of good hands. Average riders never develop their hands properly because they have never developed their seat. They are more likely to use their hands and the reins for balance instead of control because they lack the stability of a good seat. Undeveloped hands fail to communicate effectively with the horse's mouth, which causes confusion and unwitting misbehavior. To promote soft hands, it is necessary that the rider maintain flexibility in his arms and shoulders and has freedom in the wrists and fingers. The hands should be lightly in contact with the horse's mouth at all times and should follow the free movement of the horse's head and neck. The hands should never apply force greater than what is absolutely necessary to communicate the desire of the rider.

Maintaining soft hands and a good seat while swinging a saber can be in direct conflict. The weight of the saber and the effort necessary to overcome its inertial forces, combined with the rider's desire to soundly strike at a target can severely upset the rider's seat and hands. This causes the "derangement" of the body that the trooper was instructed to avoid in the early training manuals. It is also responsible for the "jerking" of the horse's mouth that was cautioned against in later instruction manuals.

Equally as important as a good military seat and good hands is the management of the horse through the proper use of the aids. It is the practiced coordination of the hands (reins), legs, body (weight) and voice that enables the rider to communicate his will and give directions to the horse. In practice these "natural aids" are sometimes assisted, or reinforced, by the "artificial aids", the spurs and whip. The management of the horse through the harmony of the aids is the essence of superior military horsemanship. Achieving mastery of the aids is an ambitious goal and one that all serious horsemen should strive for, but, as a practical matter, such a level skill is not absolutely essential for adequate use of the saber. The use of the saber on horseback requires a working understanding of the aids and their application and an above average

and practical reference for this skill is *"American Military Horsemanship" 2005, by James A. Ottevaere (ISBN-1-4208-5551-4)*

The use of the saber, as well as other military skills requires that the rider manage the horse with the reins held in the left hand, by applying the "bearing rein", or what is commonly referred to as "neck reining". To effectively manage the movement of the horse with the bearing rein while using the saber requires the additional use of a combination of aids and the understanding of several techniques involving the seat, hands and legs.

The use of the bearing rein is often misunderstood. In most instances, it is functionally impossible to make the sharp or short turns necessary to effectively use the saber by applying the bearing rein alone. Yet, this is one of the most common errors made by reenactors when using the bearing rein with the saber. When correctly applied the bearing rein is not intended as a forceful aid and is generally used to change direction while maintaining a specific gait. The turn achieved with the bearing rein alone is a long arc as opposed to a short "U". To accomplish its purpose the bearing rein is applied lightly to the upper part of the horse's neck, on the side opposite the intended direction of the turn. This action forces the horse's nose up and away from the direction of the turn and shifts the horse's balance onto the shoulder to the inside of the turn. In other words, to turn to the right the left bearing rein would be applied, bringing the horse's nose up and to the left and shifting the horse's weight onto the right shoulder. The disadvantage of the bearing rein alone is that once the rider's hand passes any distance over the centerline of the horse's neck, the intended effect is lost and it instead becomes counter productive by forcing the horse away from the direction of the turn.

The most common way to overcome the limiting effect of the bearing rein in some types of performance horses is by "over-bitting". This is the practice of using increasingly severe bits until the horse is essentially dragged into a tighter turn in order to escape the pain applied to its bars, jawbones, nose and poll. Since reenactors are usually bound by authenticity to use the military curb bit (which if properly fit and applied is only moderately severe), over-bitting is, thankfully, not an option. Therefore the most efficient way for reenactors to achieve agility and tighter turns using the bearing rein is through the combined application of supporting aids.

Since the bearing rein forces the horse's head and, if applied too aggressively, the neck and shoulders away from the direction of the turn, the resulting turn is mechanically of a larger arc than is achieved by the

respond. After which the horse's performance may be improved by more vigorous use of individual aids and by the use of these aids in combination.

There are many combinations of aids that will achieve the object of shortening the arc of the turn when applying the bearing rein. Some of these are quite complicated and depend on a superior level of horsemanship. For simplicity, here is a method that can be easily learned and will return good results. When beginning the turn, the rider should bend his upper body, above the base of support, slightly forward and toward the direction of the turn. This action helps the rider adjust to the horse's change in balance in the turn and compensates for the slight drawing of the horse's head away from the direction of the turn. At the same time, the contact of the outside leg is increased (active) at the girth. The application of the outside leg reinforces the action of the bearing rein against the neck by directing the horse's forehand in the direction of the turn. The action of the inside leg is constant (passive) and assists in maintaining impulsion and balance. It is more effective when shortening the turn in this manner to be active with the outside leg than it is to push the hand over the center of the horse's neck.

In fact it is important that the hand does not pass beyond the centerline of the horse's neck. At faster gaits, there is an added refinement to the previous method for decreasing the arc of the turn using the bearing rein. It is to turn the upper body slightly more forward and into the direction of the turn, while at the same time maintaining the contact of the outside leg at the girth and increasing the contact of the inside leg behind the girth. This combination of aids pushes the horse's hindquarters away from the direction of the turn, and off the normal arc of the turn, causing the turn to be shortened around the forehand. This will result in a considerably shorter turn, but its effectiveness is dependent on the horse's proficiency in yielding to the action of the rider's legs, and the rider's ability to use the outside leg in support of the movement of the horse's hindquarters. Keep in mind that the horse needs to be on the correct (inside) lead when making turns at a gait faster than a trot. In this case, if the horse is not on the correct lead this combination of aids may serve to force the outside lead and take the horse's balance away from the turn. This is called cross cantering to disaster.

Once the rider becomes accustomed to the use of the leg aids in support of the bearing rein, the use of the hand will be lightened considerably. The horse will then be free to use its head, neck and shoulders, as nature intended, for maintaining balance in the turns. This

militant aspects of saber use, which in any event can be downright dangerous. It is important to keep in mind some of the basic techniques that contribute to skilled saber use:

- Always keep your seat. That doesn't mean to simply stay in the saddle; it means maintain a well balanced military seat.
- Develop your leg aids and use them. Reinforce the bearing rein with your legs and seat. Keep your hands soft. Take your horse to the target. Your striking distance is only the length of the saber plus the length of your arm. Do not try to lengthen the striking distance by reaching beyond a secure seat. You will only upset your balance and likely upset that of the horse. Anything that you attempt with the saber while you are out of balance will be ineffectual, unsightly and may result in a fall.
- Keep your right shoulder within your base of support; stay positioned over your center of balance. Well-placed legs will help with that. Do not swing the saber rearward beyond the deepest part (center) of your saddle. If you need to meet a target to the rear, take your horse to it; do not reach back for the target. Many falls with the saber result from "chasing the target" with the saber and getting behind the horse's movement.
- Do not stand in your stirrups to make a strike with the saber. Stay seated. By standing you will need to grip with your upper thighs, which may "clothes pin" you from the saddle as you reach to strike the target.
- Follow the movement of your saber hand with your upper body, your seat, and your legs, not your rein hand. Your horse will adjust for this interruption in its equilibrium and may learn to follow your saber, without over working the bearing rein.

Arguably one of the most splendid sights on a reenacted battlefield is the saber charge and the ensuing melee. It is exciting for the spectators and exhilarating for the reenactors. To do it well takes skill, practice and a close relationship and communication with your horse. On the other hand, the use of the saber on horseback is a dangerous activity. Although there are very few reported accidents, the inherent dangers should not be ignored. No one should participate in any activity involving the use of the saber unless they have been judged to be a reasonably competent rider and they have had some specific training in its safe use. There does not appear to be any uniform safety standards amongst reenactors that apply to everyone

them. Most importantly do not engage in saber activities with any groups or individuals that do not abide by a specific set of safety standards.